

SACRED ART AND CULTURE

Sacrifice: The Root of Sacred Art and Culture

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That sacred art is rooted in true culture becomes apparent during any exploration of art--and especially art that is not western in origin. In situations that are truly cultural, where there is a community of people focused on the discernible unity of existence rather than the apparent separateness of superficial phenomena and independent perspective, expressions of sacred art inevitably appear.

In one way or another (be it mythological, shamanistic, ceremonial or otherwise religious) most pre-modern societies found a collective sacred perspective natural to life. On every continent, during every era in which true culture occurred, and in every religion that was supported by culture, sacred art arose.

The topics and themes of sacred cultural art are likewise many and varied. Nonetheless, some major themes seem virtually universal, while others are widely recognized in varieties unique to cultures and climates. In the interest of illustrating the universality of one of the central themes of all sacred art, consider the word "sacrifice."

According to Phillip Sherrard, the author of *The Sacred in Life and Art*, the original meaning of sacrifice was precisely "to make sacred," (*sacra facere*). Sacrifice to westerners is often a concept understood in terms of heroic acts in everyday life, in the context of wartime bravery, or in the generosity of spirit as is obvious in sharing, for example. All of these are, of course, clearly honorable examples of sacrifice.

Yet another expression of sacrifice arises in a sacred context in which an entire culture recognizes the ultimate reality or sacred ground of being (which could be called by many names, such as the Real, God, Truth, or a name unique to a given community of people). The impulse to "make sacred is the form of sacrifice of self that naturally allows and supports the process of spiritual revelation that gives birth to truly sacred art.

As Joseph Campbell and other scholars have documented, sacrifice is a characteristic theme of sacred cultures all over the globe. In his *Historical Atlas of World Mythology*, Vol. II, Part 1, Campbell displays page after page of sacred images that stood as some form of expression of sacrifice in daily life for many divergent cultures. What is interesting is that sacrifice in a cultural context is not abstracted or elevated into an imaginary source or notion, but is recognized in common ways through agriculture, food gathering and hunting, community life, the acknowledgement of love and fertility, the raising of children, the entering into womanhood and manhood, and so on. Likewise, sacrifice is recognized in extraordinary ways, as in the honoring of spiritual adepts and spiritual teachers, in the experiences of shamanistic trance and rapture, in tantric practices, in meditation and dance and all the other arts, including, of course, the sacred visual imagery in drawing and three-dimensional sculpture.

Spiritually symbolic detail abounds in the high art of Buddhism and Christianity, in mandalas and icons, prayer flags and rock paintings, vase paintings and masks and fetishes, architectural relief and fresco, musical instruments and clothing. The pipe of the great Native American plains tribes, the totem sculptures of the Northwest coastal tribes, the sacred yarn paintings of the Huichol Indians of Mexico, the rain sacrifice rock paintings of the Zimbabwe of Africa, Persian miniatures and rock carvings ... all these are examples of the sacred.